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The memoirs of a former wild child Andie MacDowell on finding fame in New York

Philippa Perry on the cat that rules her life

Still making sense

Musician and visionary David Byrne reveals his reasons to be cheerful

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And now for some good news

At 65, the phenomenally creative David Byrne is still rock's renaissance man. As he launches his first solo album in 14 years, he reveals why he's started collecting reasons to be cheerful

Making sense: (clockwise from top) Talking Heads in 1977; with ex-wife Adelle Lutz; with band members Jerry Harrison, Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth

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The first time David Byrne came to the Roundhouse in Camden was in 1977, when his band, Talking Heads, supported the Ramones. Both bands were deluged with phlegm, because that's what punks thought they were meant to do then. Forty-one years later, the man, the venue and the fans have all changed. Tonight, Byrne is treating a small, respectful audience in the Roundhouse's Sackler Space to a PowerPoint lecture called "Reasons to be Cheerful". Nobody spits.

Byrne came up with the idea two years ago. Obama was on his way out, Trump was on his way up, and Byrne wanted to alleviate the gloom by collating stories of positive change from around the world – not grand schemes but small, pragmatic innovations that work. Looking like a dapper academic with his sharp grey suit and shock of white hair, the 65-year-old clicks through his slides: carbon-neutral urban planning in Sweden, high-speed bus lanes in South America, an anti-corruption game show in Africa. To quote one of his famous lyrics, this ain't no disco, but nor is it out of character. For most of his life, Byrne has been asking if things can be done differently.

The following afternoon, tucked into the corner of a hotel lounge, I ask him if the exercise has worked. Has it made him more cheerful?

"I don't know," he says. "I think I'm a naturally cheery person so I don't have anything to measure it against. Maybe if I didn't do it I'd be really depressed, but I have no idea." Some of his friends find this confusing. "They do sometimes ask me: 'David, you seem to be fairly happy most of the time. What's up? What's going on with you?'"

Byrne laughs. He has a selection box of laughs – simmering chuckle, conspiratorial giggle, strangled whinny, lusty guffaw, something that sounds like a suppressed sneeze – yet remains somewhat detached. He gazes out of the window at the rush-hour crowds, he studies an unwanted plate of fancy biscuits, he looks nowhere in particular. Very occasionally, as if by accident, he makes eye contact. "I've changed over the years," he insists. "I'm imperfect, but I communicate better. I don't just bury things and let them explode at some point. I'm able to talk in a social group whereas before I would retreat into a corner."

It makes you wonder how much Byrne would have achieved if he had been naturally sociable. In 1986, he was billed on the cover of *Time* magazine as "Rock's Renaissance Man: Singer, Composer, Lyricist, Guitarist, Film Director, Writer, Actor, Video Artist, Designer, Photographer." Since then, he has released six solo albums; recorded with Brian Eno, St Vincent, Arcade Fire and De La Soul; scored movies, plays and TV shows; won an Oscar; founded the Luaka Bop record label; started an online radio station; composed an operetta about Imelda Marcos with Fatboy Slim; exhibited artwork; written books about music and cycling; published volumes of photographs and sketches; designed bike racks; turned a ferry terminal into a musical instrument; and played himself on *The Simpsons*. Like Brian Eno, a friend and collaborator for 40 years, Byrne has parlayed rock celebrity into a life so eventful that it makes merely performing in a band look parochial.

"There are certainly things I've done that weren't as good as they could have been," Byrne says. "Or I've taken wrong turns and there's no fixing it. But then you think, well, move on. Don't worry about it too much. Better to keep the creative muscles moving rather than sitting and waiting for the great stuff to arrive."

When he meets Eno, Byrne says, they often don't talk about music at all. I suspect he wishes his interviews were more like that. Byrne is about to release his first solo album in 14 years, *American Utopia*, and Reasons to be Cheerful is a way to make the promotional schedule more interesting.

"I tend to avoid the life story," he says. In place of a memoir, his 2012 book *How Music Works* was a curious (in both senses of the word) amalgam of autobiography, anthropology and theory in which he often came across as a neutral observer of his own life.

Talking Heads released their final album in 1988, but their influence endures. Just last year, Selena Gomez built her hit, Bad Liar, around the groove from 1977's Psycho Killer. In the 2016 movie *20th Century Women*, a teenage boy in late-70s California is bullied for liking "art fags" Talking Heads instead of hardcore punk bands. Byrne finds this so hilarious that he can barely speak.

Byrne, bassist Tina Weymouth and drummer Chris Frantz met at the Rhode Island School of Design and formed Talking Heads in 1975; keyboardist/guitarist Jerry Harrison joined later. They were chronologically punk, but spiritually post-punk, determined to dismantle the clichés of rock'n'roll and write their own rules. "No rock moves or poses, no pomp or drama, no rock hair, no rock lights, no rehearsed stage patter," Byrne wrote in *How Music Works*. They questioned everything. What is a rock band? What is a pop song? Why this? Why not that? A better title would have been How Does Music Work?

Byrne's songwriting perspective is summed up on his new single, Everybody's Coming to My House: "We're only tourists in this life / Only tourists but the view is nice." Even when he wasn't singing in character – a psychopath, a televangelist, a domestic terrorist – he had a knack for making the familiar strange and unnerving. Animals, vehicles, buildings, TV, weather, haircuts... everything was seen with alien eyes. It's no surprise to learn that his one attempt at writing a short story ("really not my thing") was science fiction. "I'm not just going to take the received technique," he remembers thinking when the band started. "I have to start from scratch and see what comes out. I thought there's no rule that says you can't do this, so let's try writing about something that nobody's written about before."

'I can talk in a social group now. Before, I'd retreat into a corner'

To do that, you need an unusual perspective on the world. "It always seems completely natural to me because it's me," Byrne says with amusement. "I've had enough people tell me that it's not completely typical that I know, oh, OK, to some people this might seem a little odd. But then often I feel like no, I'm just giving you an objective description of what's in front of me. What's so odd about that?"

The personality that spawned such unique music did not make him easy to share a band with. A few years ago, I interviewed Tina Weymouth and she was still furious about how she thinks Byrne treated the rest of the band. "David's a very different kind of person," she told me. "He doesn't relate emotionally to things. You cannot guess what's in his mind, and what he says and what he does can be two entirely different things." A few days after I meet Byrne, Chris Frantz, who is married to Weymouth, will write online that the singer had "demeaned, humiliated and marginalised" her.

Does Byrne feel bad about this unresolved tension? "Um," he winces, "she has said some wild things ›

› sometimes. I feel bad that the ending was so messy, but that tends to happen. It's pretty hard to have an amiable divorce." He brightens. "Although I've kind of managed that. We're actually friends now." (He means his 17-year marriage to the costume designer Adelle Lutz, which ended in 2004.) "Yes it was uncomfortable," he continues. "I think I probably did not behave all that well all the time. Neither did the others. It was a very messy thing. But to hold on to that seems like..." he shrugs, "well that was quite a while ago."

Was he a hard person to understand back then? "I was probably a little bit less forthcoming. There were certainly periods when I was singularly focused on getting something accomplished." He mentions the tour for their 1983 album *Speaking in Tongues*, which traced an arc from paranoid solitude to communal ecstasy and was documented by Jonathan Demme in the film *Stop Making Sense*. "That was a real obsession. I can imagine I must at times have been a real pain in the ass to deal with. The shows were fine but maybe the experience with me was not always pleasant."

Even if he were to mend that bridge, Byrne would have no interest in a reunion. It's not as if he's creatively lonely. *American Utopia* features contributions from Eno, Sampha and The xx producer Rodaidh McDonald. The seeds were sown years ago, when Byrne read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* while on tour (a very Byrne-like thing to do). "Many of the chapter titles are questions," he says. "You can tell he wishes America well, but he sees a lot of problems in store. He sees it as a grand experiment, which a lot of people did at the time. That utopian sense is still there but it's very close to being completely extinguished."

Byrne officially became an American in 2012. Although he has lived in the US since he was eight, he was born in Scotland and didn't apply for dual citizenship until an awkward conversation at a polling station. "I'd been occasionally voting before that," he admits. "I naively thought it was legal and they never cross-checked. Then eventually they looked at my ID and said: 'You can't vote!' So I said OK, I've gotta go through this whole thing now."

Does it make him feel any different? "If you're going through passport control you start thinking, what if they think this means I agree with a lot of the things the US gets up to? But you could say that about people here as well. They might think they're more clever but they're not."

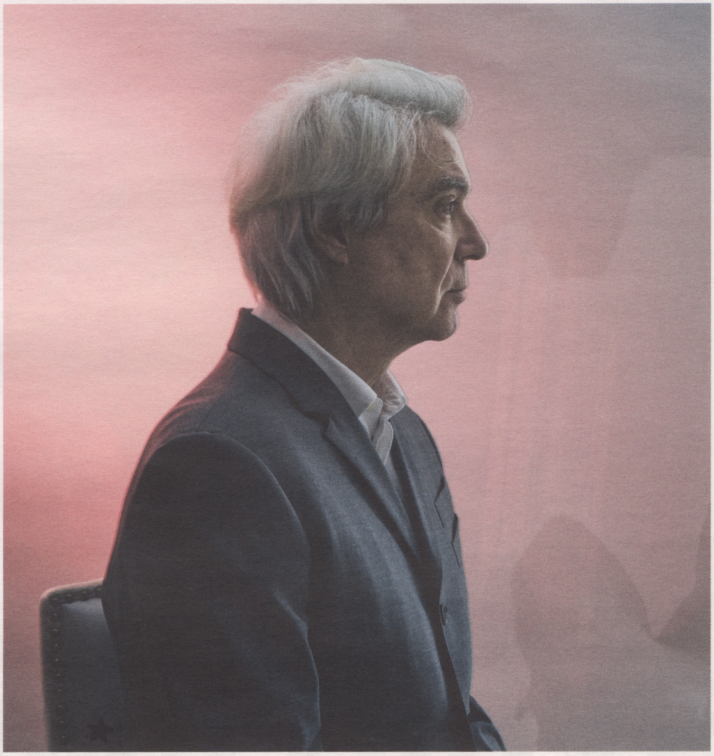
Rather than get caught up in the "political noise" of Trump, Byrne seeks out smaller, more uplifting stories. One of the modest heroes of Reasons to be Cheerful is Dale Ross, the Republican mayor of Georgetown, Texas, who broke with party dogma and invested in clean energy. "That to me was hugely inspiring," Byrne says. "This guy stepped out of the ring and said: 'I've done the math and I think this would be better for my city.'"

I can picture Byrne in City Hall, commissioning studies and introducing practical reforms. Remembering his own bohemian youth in 70s New York, he worries about the economic obstacles to creativity now. "Things were allowed to flourish," he says. "In a city where the rents have gone sky-high, you might need to regulate things so there's a diversity of activities and incomes rather than closing it off and saying: 'Only fully successful people live on this island. The rest of you – call us when you've got more money.'"

Utopia, for Byrne, is not a particular place or system but an aspiration. "It's more about our yearning for something better," he says. "We keep asking ourselves: is there another way to live or is this the only way? Did we have to end up like this or could it have been different?"

He could be talking about his art. It's a long way from supporting the Ramones to writing a disco opera about Imelda Marcos, but Byrne's philosophy has been remarkably consistent. What he cherished about punk four decades ago was the DIY aspect. "Anyone can do it," he says. "It was very inclusive in that way." He found the same DIY spirit at the Mudd Club, the early 80s New York hangout where you could find Byrne and Blondie, Basquiat and Warhol, Ginsberg and Burroughs. "You've got an idea? You've got something you want to try? Why not?" He's still asking. ■

David Byrne's new album, American Utopia, is released on 9 March by Nonesuch Records. He tours the UK in June



'Utopia is about yearning for something better. Did we have to end up like this or could it have been different': David Byrne

Global reasons to be cheerful

By David Byrne

1. Healing the divide
Georgetown is one of Texas's most conservative suburbs, but gets all its electricity from renewable sources. Its mayor, Dale Ross, a Republican in what is considered oil country, made a decision in 2015. He ignored party orthodoxy and did what was best for his constituents. That folks can think rationally and ignore partisan dogmas, on both sides, is hugely encouraging.

2. Norway prison reform
Most countries' prison systems are failures – the rate of recidivism is abysmal. But Norway seems to have figured out a successful solution. Their incarceration rate is 75 per 100,000 people, compared to 707 per 100,000 in the US. The crime rate is lower, but part of the reason it's lower is because they focus on genuine reform, not just punishment. The rate at which inmates end up back in prison is 20% in Norway, versus 76.6% in the US. At Halden Prison there are no bars on the windows, they have full kitchens (knives included) and lots of job and vocational training. There's even a recording studio. So whatever they're doing, it's working.

3. Bike sharing has conquered the world
Not only does it feel good to ride, but cycling relieves automobile congestion, it's good for business, it doesn't pollute, it's healthy and it expands the mental maps of residents... and I've found it's often the fastest way to get around. Cities all over the world have adopted similar systems to the French Vélib system, and now some Chinese companies are introducing stationless systems.

4. Knock-on effects of culture
We in the arts and humanities often complain that our work is undervalued, at least in terms of being beneficial to society compared to the Stem disciplines. Finally we have some proof, and the effects are somewhat unexpected. A recent study by the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania showed that when libraries and other cultural institutions are placed in the boroughs around New York, there are surprising knock-on effects:
a. The kids' test scores go up
b. Spousal abuse goes down
c. Obesity goes down
d. The crime rate goes down
Things that might seem to be unrelated are actually connected. To lower crime, maybe we don't need more prisons or stiffer sentencing; part of the solution might be to build a library.

5. Successfully dealing with drug addiction
Fifteen years ago Portugal had a drug problem. Rather than declare a 'war on drugs' as the US and other places did, they took a bold and radical step, and it was hugely successful.

Here's what they did. They decriminalised *all* drugs and began a major health campaign. They viewed drug use and addiction as a health issue, not a criminal justice issue. Last year there were 64,000 overdose deaths in the US. Among Portuguese adults there were only 30 drug-overdose deaths – which is 1/50th of the US overdose rate. Looks like they won the war on drugs by not joining it.

reasonstobecheerful.world